Indian Cinema Superbazaar

Edited by
Aruna Vasudev · Philippe Lenglet

1983

VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD

VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD
Regd. Office: 5 Ansari Road, New Delhi 110002
H.O. **Vikas House, 20/4 Industrial Area, Sahibabad 201010**
Distt. Ghaziabad, U.P. (India)

Copyright © Aruna Vasudev, Philippe Lenglet, 1983

ISBN 0-7069-2226-3

1V2V1623

—

Printed at Kay Kay Printers, 150 D, Kamla Nagar, Delhi 110007 (India)

MANI KAUL

Mani Kaul graduated from the Film and Television Institute, Pune, in 1966. His first film was a feature, Uski Roti *in 1969. His highly individualistic style set the pattern for his later films which confound most spectators and delight those who see in them the abstract, intellectual* auteur *films so rare in Indian cinema. "Kaul is the stern poet of the Indian cinema who goes his own way regardless . . . such a natural film maker that even his obfuscations seem resonant and certainly many of his images remain in the mind", wrote Derek Malcolm in the British "Guardian", in January 1981.*

He has made a number of documentaries and three more feature films, Ashad Ka Ek Din *(1971),* Duvidha *(1973) and* Sateh Se Uthata Admi *(1980). None of these films have been commercially released in India though they have won high praise and awards, nationally and internationally. In 1976 he was awarded a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship to work on a dissertation on* The Crisis of Form in Culture.

Q. *Let's start from the beginning. About education, and how you came to be interested in films. The educational aspect first: what did you study?*

MANI KAUL

My childhood was spent in small towns and sometimes in the interior of Rajasthan. My father was in the Revenue Department and he had to do a lot of touring, but there was also one very special thing about my father. He was a very honest Government servant and as a result, all my childhood, all our family experiences, there is this peculiar thing of my father getting transferred. So my mother used to keep half the luggage packed always. It was very terrible for him. Those were the early days after Independence and there was a feudal atmosphere. So the Government officers, the ministers behaved as in earlier days when Rajasthan was a feudal state. I have toured extensively in Rajasthan, in Jodhpur, Jaipur, and Bikaner districts. My education was also peculiar. Finally, my father thought of putting us in some place and that was Jaipur. We studied there in school and then went to college. I was in the hostel because it was impossible to keep moving. As it happens in small towns and more so in my case, the education was rather haphazard.

I was a very quiet kind of child and my eyesight was weak. I wear specs. And I never complained about this to my father. If I couldn't see a thing, I would go close to it. I remember very clearly that if I went to a film, it would look practically hazy. I saw life also like that . . . I was very quiet so I never complained. It was by sheer accident that as late as when I was 11 years old. . . I remember that year, it was in Mount Abu.

By chance we were standing on a mountain top and my sister said: "Look at that road, it runs like a ribbon". Probably because of my weak eyesight, I lacked concentration. I was a very lost child. (In fact, my mother seriously thought that they should take me to some doctor. They thought there might be some problem like retardation or something.) So my sister told me what the road looked like, and I just couldn't see it. My father used to wear specs. Suddenly it occurred to him and he took off his specs. . . they were, of course, quite powerful in terms of lenses. I wore the specs and it was like a shock. I saw the trees, leaves, rocks, mountains. It was too much for me. Of course I was immediately taken to an optician and given glasses. After that I saw a film called *Helen of Troy*, you remember, it was a Hollywood film with Rosanna. . .

That was the first film I saw, as a 12-13 year old, with specs. And after that I just could not think of anything else in my life except films. At that time, I thought I would become an actor. Yes, obviously I had no idea then that a director plays a role in films. It so happened that I continued to toy with the idea of joining films. Another strange thing that happened was that I saw a documentary made by Chidananda Das Gupta. I was probably 15 years old at that time.

Q. Portrait of a City?

A. Yes. And suddenly at that time it struck—the possibility of doing something more in a film. After that I decided immediately that the thing was to direct a film. So I went into this library, the University Library to read books on films. Of course in India, it's terrible, even today, in colleges and universities, there are no books on films. But I found this Rudolf Arnheim book on film. Only one book in the whole shelf of visual arts. And I think it's the only book in my life that I've stolen from a library. I was shivering when I was crossing the gate. I can't describe those feelings. It was terrible for me to do that. But I did it.

After that I made up my mind. I had my uncle in Bombay who was a director. Mahesh Kaul was his name. He was my father's younger brother. Film was kind of taboo in our house because he didn't do too well for quite some time. My own father was very upset. So when I decided, there were a lot of problems. Finally, I somehow managed to convince my parents and I said I'll go and stay with my uncle. My father wrote to him and I came to Bombay for a holiday. It was my uncle who suggested that I should not join him as an assistant. It would take 7 years to learn what I could learn at the Film Institute in 3 years.

Q. *At the Institute, for the first time, you must have seen some of the classics of world cinema.*

A. This is what I want to tell you. I can relate this experience with many others in the Institute. There was this other boy from Jaipur. By

the time I had done my Institute diploma, I had made my first film also. I went back to meet my family in Jaipur. And this young fellow came, he was my father's colleague's son. He wanted to join the Institute. He finally appeared for the examination and got admitted. The point that I'm driving at is that after six months, I happened to go to Poona. I was also looking for this boy. I wanted to know what was happening to this fellow because he also came from Jaipur. So I went to the canteen and I saw a boy sitting there with a beard, dark glasses and smoking heavily. He was talking of Godard, you know. Just after six months! It took me nearly ten minutes to realise that it was the same boy. I was really shocked . . . It was incredible what happened to people in the Institute.They come from all over India. Obviously they also come from states where they have not had such great exposure to cinema. But states like Rajasthan, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, in terms of film, nothing is happening. Such a transformation occurred in the Institute and it's really very dramatic.

Q. *It happened to you also*?

A. Yes, the first thing that I saw was *Pather Panchali* and I hadn't seen it before. It was as late as 1963 that I saw *Pather Panchali.* It was made sometime in 1956.

Of course, I had seen all the Hollywood films that used to be shown on Sundays. Every week I used to see a number of films. My family got more or less reconciled to the idea that this fellow would not listen and they used to let me go and see so many films. Otherwise like a traditional family, we used to go and see 2-3 films a month. But finally I got friendly with the chap who owned the theatre. I used to watch a film 13 times there. In small towns, you have a special box for the proprietor and his guests. I used to go there and see a film every day. Even Hindi films, like I remember *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*, a film I still love very much. Made by Guru Dutt. I have seen it 17 times. Every day I used to go and sit there after college and see films. I wish there were other films I could have seen at that time, it would made so much difference.

In the Institute also, the biggest exposure was not, at least the development that took place, was not through the academic courses they were teaching. That was very orthodox and very peculiar. Even now it's very complicated, I think. But the Archives! The National Film Archive has everything, all the Russian films, the French New Wave, Italian films, German films, everything is there. By the time you've been there three years, it makes a lot of difference. I would say that even the first year and part of second year was mainly exposure to films and I used to get very bored with the classes. Because the teachers we had. At that time there was nobody who could have any idea. In fact, even now, I don't think anyone has any idea of what's what in the Film Institute. It's very peculiar. It's not like the established traditional form, like if you want to learn music, you begin in a certain way and you do some established exercises, you practice

them. Over here it is different, depending upon the teachers. At that time, nobody had an idea; they were doing some old exercises in script writing and some kind of shooting.

Q. *How quickly did your ideas become clear about how you wanted to make films which were so very different from anything that had been done in India? How did you arrive at this very special style of your own that has nothing to do with an imitation of Godard or Bresson?*

A. I was very pleased to read something that sorted out a lot of problems with me. Recently I read an interview with Tarkovsky. I really admire his work tremendously and therefore I keep on collecting anything that I come across. And he said something very beautiful. Somebody was asking him about influences and then he said, "I really keep myself away. If I see that I am making a scene which is becoming like something I have seen, then I like to re-do it." But—he added: "Lately I feel that it is becoming like Bergman and I feel it's like a homage to Bergman so I do it." Then he spoke of Bresson: "With Bresson, it's not a question of influence. He's left deep mark on my life and when I make films, I don't think of a Bresson film or a Bresson sequence. I think of Bresson. Because thinking of Bresson helps me to shoot my film."

So it sorted out a lot of problems with me because it is exactly the same case. It's not a question of imitating him. What Bresson has done to him is what Ritwik Ghatak did to me. My ideas became clear to me, not on account of learning or reading books. I think I went through a more or less physical transformation and the man responsible was Ritwik Ghatak. And I can tell you he taught me a lot, I really attach a lot of importance to this. Because I really feel now, that the kind of background I came from, with Ritwik Ghatak, it meant a sort of cracking up. I mean if I go into personal detail, may be I drank with him or I spent nights with him, on Bombay streets. I always used to be with him. Of course, he was a great teacher and he knew everything about film. Beginning from light, camera, lenses, recordings, everything. He was really extraordinary. But more than that, it meant a complete transformation within me as a person and it's very difficult to describe.

I still regard a book on cinema as very important. A book called *Grammar of Film* written by Spottiswoode in 1935. There it is written that an artist does more than what he knows. And I think this is an incredible statement. It's a fantastic statement. Because on the other hand, if you have a very well defined position, if you have very well defined ideas, you tend to execute those ideas and execution is not an artistic activity. To execute something, it's not artistic, it is not art at all.

Q. *It's an intellectual exercise.*

A. It's a struggle of an extraordinary nature to create a work of art.

Because you are definitely entering into those worlds of which you are not aware. So you are full of anxiety, you are full of nervousness, it's terrible. To make something. But if you know what you are making, the ideas you may have or the intellectual equipment that you might have, is very like an equipment, to my mind. It's not the object of your work. My awareness intellectually is my equipment to do something, to create an object. So if I have some tools to create an object, I may have some intellectual concept or ideas to create an object but I wouldn't consider it as an artistic activity. To illustrate these ideas into film.

Q. *Why do you make films*?

A. I think it's like this. I'll try and express it. Apart from various ideological positions that people face at a certain time, there is also a certain sensuousness about life and I think this sensuousness is a very strong element. I am using this word sensuousness in a broad sense. It's a modern word for what classically you would describe as feeling, because it's more, it covers more. It covers everything about people, about nature, about human beings. I think people come into a relation on account of a certain sensuousness and a sensuousness cannot come into existence until the fact does, like a political fact—when I say a political fact, I mean a fact which is constantly changing nature and the nature of human beings. It's a non-sensuousness activity in that sense. But the same political fact can become sensuousness if it is naturalised by various cultural methods. Any particular point in history, any particular political belief, becomes quite natural through a certain kind of mythology, gets mythologised, becomes natural to people. And they begin to respond to that. But at the time of its inception, a fact is not natural to them. So a new idea, therefore, is an idea which is not natural. It's a position or a fact to which you arrive in terms of economics or politics, or living conditions. I feel that today although politically or even industrially, we are very open towards new relations or towards people, but the sensuousness that binds us is still very old. Because the new sensuousness is still not maturing, so the way of relating itself is dated. Relating to anything which is really the aspect of content. What we say is the content in our work which is like our attitude and not just some thematic thing in a film. You may still have that feudal sensuousness within you of relating to people and things at home and outside. So it lags behind in a sense, the sensuousness always lags behind and anything that is trying to alter this sensuousness is trying to alter something very deep. Because it is almost the structure of your being inside. So suddenly you come across a lot of films which, in terms of information, that is in thematic value, are very progressive. But when you see the actual content of that work which means the real relation or world attitude, you feel this guy is still in the forties. Or somewhere there. Because he is still seeing faces like that, he is still seeing relations like that, he is still responding to emotions like

that, and therefore he is creating like that. When he is recording a film, he has certain sounds going up, certain music coming in a certain way, he puts effects in a certain way, he makes a dialogue spoken in a certain way. So ultimately, at least for me, an artistic activity is one that somehow attempts to alter this sensuousness. It somehow tries to bring a new relationship into this sensuousness and drops most of its dead material. There is a lot of dead material sticking in this sensuousness within us. It just goes on because we just can't give it up. We may have a very progressive, intellectual film work, mentally, but there are some very small things that cling in terms of the sensuousness which must have been progressive at one point. And over the course of time, naturalised. I wouldn't be surprised if one of these days reality also gets naturalised. After all, Vincent Van Gogh dies and today he is naturalised to the extent that we have film posters in the strokes of Vincent Van Gogh or Dutch painters. I saw an advertisement which they have painted like him, on a bus. I mean the agony that man suffered to create that form, to break the earlier forms. The classical forms that he broke to create this modern idiom, he had to commit suicide for it.

Q. *But it was not a deliberate act, it was something that came from within him, that was a part of his own sensuousness.*

A. Exactly. Therefore I say that it is not as if it suddenly appeared like a flash. But it must have been a whole area of struggle for him—a struggle with himself.

Then I think the use of information, of knowing various things, reading or keeping oneself informed, is to be equipped to struggle. But it is not my job to have an idea and try to translate this into cinema. Because I'm not doing that work. I'll never do it. I don't want my images to be a translation or illustration of an idea that I may have. The worst thing that can happen, is that, because you also try to picture within a certain philosophy, say a certain political philosophy in different ways. Because all of them are trying to tie it and make it a perfect system and all of them are trying to find fault with the others. Everytime you are trying to do this and create a well-knit picture, and then illustrating this well-knit picture, I think what you have done, cannot by any standards be considered artistic. Because it has no element of struggle. And unless it has struggle, it loses its effectiveness.

Q. *It becomes very difficult when you are dealing with a form like film which involves people, people who work with you and people who are eventually going to see it, to make them see that struggle, make them understand it or have their perceptions altered by it. Do you think that has any importance at all? Whether they can understand or not, are changed by it or not. Are you concerned with what people feel about your films?*

A. Usually, it is said that I am not concerned with them. That's a very easy thing to say because everybody says that this fellow does not want to communicate, this fellow is not interested in an audience. Especially my detractors, they find it very easy to quote it anywhere. Communication, they bring up this word, all the time. On one hand, I would say that communication by itself is nothing. It's only a way of transmitting certain information to something else. But I would again question what is to be communicated and what is the relation it is seeking. Supposing I am communicating with you, what relationship am I seeking? What level am I seeking? As far as the problem of people not understanding is concerned, I'm quoted as saying all the time, I cannot be concerned with it. Because for me, it's a special choice. I'm using this word—"special choice"—as true subjectivity. True subjectivity within oneself is spiritual, not the religious sort. It's a choice like that.

Q. *Yes, because when a painter paints, when Van Gogh painted, he wasn't painting in order to make people see life the way he saw it. He painted it as he saw it and he painted what he felt in him. And in a sense, that is what you are doing in your films.*

A. There is something that I must state here. It is this that in India, there is a great tradition of say music. A musician is a soloist, it's a very great tradition in India. All music practically is soloist at the moment. There is no attempt at any kind of polyphony, East-West meets etc. Essentially it's a solo performance. There are various schools in music. Since I am working, I would like to call myself a traditionalist in the sense that I am still working with traditions in cinema. I have not tried to dissociate myself and do something which I will call innovative, which has no connection or continuity with people who have done work in cinema already. So when I seek a certain continuity with Bresson or Tarkovsky, I'm not seeking only inspiration. I'm seeking a certain relation with the tradition of cinema. So I think that this is quite an important development that has occurred.

About the audience, I will say that I am still struggling to create a kind of cinema that would not be subjected to commercial speculation, that I finish my film and I don't know, it flops. Or suddenly it succeeds much beyond my expectations and I'm a big man and get a lot of money, whatever. Over the years, I want to develop my own audience, like when a good musician's audience doesn't come to him, he develops an audience, for himself. There are people who want to listen to him. So before I retire from films, I would like to do this, I would like to have a kind of audience which of course cannot be static, some people will go and new people will come. But I would like to have audiences in various centres. When I make a film, they will want to see this film. I would like to have a steady relation, because they must be aware of my slow development, of changes that occur in me, of the thing that I am trying. And if I have this

audience, I also know what is happening to them. I don't want to appeal to a mass of millions, it's not my concern. How can I make a film which will appeal to everybody, people ask. It's not possible. For me, that audience becomes a very special audience. I can understand that audience much more. I can understand that many people much more and they can understand my work much more. Therefore, it presupposes that I'm not going to have some spectacular success. Or a spectacular failure. I have been there for 12 years. People had wished me away quite some time back. Every 3 or 4 years, the rumours spread that I had died! Every third, fourth year. I'm sure there are quite a few people waiting for me to disappear from the scene. It's a very strange thing.

Q. *It disturbs them so much that they don't want you there*!

A. No, they ask me how are you going to make your next film. And after a struggle, here, there, after two years I do a film. Again 3 years I will go away, and then they say this fellow has disappeared. Exactly after 6 months I have a kind of resurrection; so it's been like that with me. Very difficult because in 12 years I have made only 4 films. But now it's become easy for me to make films, it won't be so difficult. Already, I have a number of sponsors.

A market for my films outside India is opening up for me. Which is very important because even people in Germany live on account of films being made in France and England. Even people in Germany—it's an affluent country—have tremendous problems. One of the film makers of Germany met me in Cannes this year. He won the Cannes award, and is having tremendous problems with making new films. He also told me that *Tin Drum* was made by five countries. It's not possible for Germany to finance that kind of film. So it's very good for me, that recently I made a film for ZDF, which is the second channel in the German television network. It's a 72 minute long film on the desert. It's generally based on ethnographic material, but it's construction or object is not to make an ethnographic film. It's an account of desert life, where I used traditions as techniques of living. It's been telecast and and I've got reviews which are very good. Really quite good and I think that that should mean more work. Every two years if I get one film from there, and I think I will, looking at the reviews, it will be quite thrilling.

Q. *To come back to films. In the context of the whole idea of going to the cinema. Do you think it's necessary not just in India, but anywhere else, to have the big cinema which will appeal to audiences and provide entertainment, as against the kind of films that you want to make? In fact what do you think is the role of cinema in a society at large? Because if everybody were to make the kinds of films which you make. . .*

A. No, it's not possible. It's absolutly absurd to say that. I would say

that there should be several ways of making films but these several ways of making films must not have several styles, but several traditions. It's possible to do that, I think. Because cinema is very young, although you are already beginning to notice certain traditions in cinema developing. So I think it is possible to develop several traditions and those traditions must all exist together. The truth is not absolutely in one or the other, but it's in the process of several interacting. You apprehend something about existence itself. I would not absolutise my position nor would I accept as absolute anybody else's position. But what is unnecessary, to my mind, which I don't know how it will be done, is this total unconcerned commercial trash. I just don't understand. It's almost as though they go about looking for some connections with mythology and this kind of cinema. It's like making it sacred in a strange way. I don't just see the connection. I can't see the connection in the manner they are trying to make significant a standard commercial plot with a hero and a villain. You go back to certain epics and you will find there were villains, there were heroes. What does it mean?

On the other hand, I feel that instead of developing the kind of tradition that I'm talking about, what is beginning to happen in the Indian film is the easy way out. Like if I were working with some other art form like painting, architecture, anything. It takes a whole life time. Suppose you are a writer, you can't write one poem or one collection of poems and stop. But today if you make a film, a first film, and if you are more aware than others because you have a cultural background, intellectual, whatever, and go to some festival, you are made socially. And there is this ridiculous thing about film. It's being used like this, to my mind. And it's going to happen increasingly. People who have nothing to do with films, there is no way of stopping them. It's all right, if a fellow wants to make a film, he should. Ultimately, these people will betray their interest very soon and go into another direction in five years time. All these people.

Q. *They may not if they find that they've become 'cult' figures.*

A. It's also possible. But it's very easy. I mean, to use an example, like Dharmaraj's[1] case, he died. He was a very good friend of mine, I knew him for a long time. But it's a fact that if there is any credit to that man, it's because he had shot or recreated a slum—a slum in Bombay. He's known as a film maker. He has died unfortunately, and couldn't see his success. But it amounts to this, that if you want to make a film, you have to look for a subject, a theme, then you just make it on that. That's enough. It is not important for them to develop this as an artistic vehicle like everything else. And this can be very bad because it will ultimately, the whole thing, go to commercial cinema if this keeps happening.

[1]Rabindra Dharmaraj directed *Chakra* (1980).

Q. *But maybe that will make it possible for more people to use film in the way you do without having to struggle as you did, because you have opened the way as well. And once film making gets accepted and easy, at the same time, it will be easier for the other thing to develop as well.*

A. The same people, why don't they take to painting? Or why don't they sing? We have a problem in fact with music, why don't they become musicians? Because they can't. It will take several years!

Q. *But they can become film makers*?

A. Because no parameters are defined. And its potential has still not been exhausted. Now I hear some of my so-called colleagues, are getting fed up of zoom lenses. I said, my God, I'll be relieved because it's been done too much. This friend told me: "It's like smokings; you never know when you pull out a cigarette and start smoking." So it was like that with him. He told me that he never knew when he started zooming, and that he was very happy he had been able to give it up. So I said it's very good because at least now some people are tired of things like that. It's good that people are really struggling to develop this Indian form of cinema.

Q. *Let us consider your own films. I haven't seen your last one but the three that I do know*—Uski Roti, Ashad Ka Ek Din *and* Duvidha, *the three are entirely different in terms of content and style. I'm using very straightforward words. Would you like to say something about that*?

A. Yes, first of all, two things I didn't want to do. First, I have no association with theatre. Even today, I see plays, but in my mind somewhere, I have some kind of an allergy to the theatre as Bresson has. If you read his book, it's called *Notes on Cinematography*. It is not available here, but I was able to get a copy from a stray bookshop in Munich. I was desperate for three years. It was terrible because Bresson was giving me a copy in French and I said I can't read French. So he said you wait for the English translation. I really cursed myself. Because he would have given it to me with his signature and I would really have cherished it.

Q. *You should have taken it*!

A. I said I can't read French, so he put it back and said that in that case the English translation was coming. I said, "Fine". In this book, he talks about theatre. He had to take a very strict position because he is probably the first big innovator in cinema. So he had to really take place after Eisentein because Eisentein worked mainly with montage. Montage also works in connection with theatre because it constructs like that. It treats a fragment in relation to another fragment and yet another fragment and it thinks of creating a reality. Whereas the anti-montage tradition

which is being practised by Bresson, was also to some extent practised by Ozu and the Greek film maker Angelopoulos. This is a kind of tradition where a shot is treated as a whole, so that you don't have details. If there is a detail, it's a whole detail, it's not a detail of a scene. Things like "cut-away" or "cut-in" don't exist in our vocabulary, at least in mine. I never repeat an angle. Some people shoot and again come back to it. I have never done that in any one of my films to date. I have just not gone back to the same angle, it's finished for me. I also don't work in the way that people take a general shot, then they take sequences or the same sequence. I also don't take one shot from various angles to see where to cut. For me, each shot is an entire commitment to that shot. And if it is invalid, in my mind it may be changed and I must be in some other place. I have somehow to reach the right place and the right angle and right lens and that's it. That I can do. Beyond that, if it's a failure, it's a failure. But it's an actual commitment, that particular angle and that particular point and it just cannot be repeated. It's a past in time, it's finished. You can't come back to it again. You can only go to a new position. In this, you have to treat the shot not as a part but as a phase so that you get rid of this idea of working in space. You work more in time. So it's like phases, it's not like parts of a space with which you can destruct your time. It's the time that you handle directly. You have to construct a kind of a phase. And there's a very big difference because it causes all kinds of differences in taking and shooting. So two kinds of this association that I had very much in my mind were there right from the beginning. One from the theatre, the other was from neo-realism. In that sense, even Mr Ray who is quite critical of my work, acknowledges that I am the one who has not followed his tradition. Probably I am the only one. Because I never could associate myself with the kind of idiom that Mr Ray developed, although I like his work very much and I must say I have a great regard for him; despite differences with him, I really feel he is a very great film maker. And Ritwik Ghatak who was very deeply associated with theatre, was perhaps responsibile for this development. Although I do not take to theatre, but I consider Ritwik Ghatak's film *Komal Gandhar* the best film made in India today. I honestly feel that if there were a dispassionate audience and if every film maker in India was asked to give one film from his entire career, and they all sent their best films, I would give Ritwik Ghatak's *Komal Gandhar*. Nobody would be able to match the kind of quality and level that he has achieved in that film. It is just incredible, what he has done in that film. For him it is no more a question of either recording reality or constructing space in that manner. In this sense, Ritwik Ghatak was probably the first film maker who introduced the idea of epic. He spoke about it in his interviews and he spoke to us also—Kumar Shahani has also been doing work on that. The idea of an epic, true epic form, where at many levels things are developing in time, with many characters, there is no one narrative plot on one hand and on the other hand there is no preoccupation with the phenomena as it is or its details,

lyrical or whatever. There is no engagement with reality like that. I think that this transcending that Ghatak had in his films, I associate it, myself, more with Bresson. Therefore, I chose a medium which will raise itself mainly on the images by themselves and on sound by itself and not borrow their idiom from another discipline. In that sense, my first film is quite an extreme film. Well, I saw it recently, the first film that I had made, I must have been 27 years old at that time. I was quite frightened, it's unrelenting. . . this quality I probably still have but in a different way. It really looks as if it's a total disregard, it's too much to watch that film. It's quite a thing to see your own film like that. I was terribly obsessed with this idea that there should not be a trace of theatre. Therefore no trace of characterisation, there is no trace of psychology of characters. It should be direct sculpting in time. For me, there is a very big difference. It's like a plastic art, it was not a performing art. Cinema is like plastic art for me. It is required to be a performing art, the way theatres are made, the way people come in, it is not like a plastic art. That's a very big problem when you talk of theatre, big theatre. The big theatres, Hollywood style, which have now been broken down. For instance, in Paris, it is really great when you go to old time big places which are now three or four places. That's what it should be! Why should a theatre like 'Eros' exist? It should be five theatres.

Q. *Yet you took for your second film, a play?*

A. Not only that. For the first time, I took a story from Rakesh.[2] And for the fourth film I have again taken the text of a writer. You want me to explain why?

Q. *Yes, because in wanting to get away from theatre, you still took for your second film a play that existed. Written for a theatrical performance.*

A. Yes, that's true. There is something interesting I'll tell you about this paradoxical relationship. If you have read André Bazin's book *What is Cinema*, there he speaks of this very paradoxical relation. If you haven't arrived at a form which I don't think that film as yet has arrived at, a form where one should make a film without any basis whatsoever. Just like one could make a painting without any basis in any other art form, or one could sing without a basis in literature, I think cinema still hasn't arrived at that level. And I can say safely because at the end of the same interview with Tarkovsky, he says: "I wish I could film a man's life for 30 years and then make a film of just 12,000 feet." It's still so difficult that he feels, he is such a great film maker, that he has to work with actors and with lights and whatever. I feel that as a kind of beginning towards real cinema, the beginning can only be made if the other art forms which have

[2]Mohan Rakesh, a well-known contemporary Hindi playwright, died in 1972.

been in a sense corrected into film, are given their identity back. So what is happening is that many films are being made which are based on theatre or literature or on folk stories.

Every time, in order to make a film, cinematic, as they say, what they would do is, they would try to adapt that literature to a kind of form where they distort literature. So for me, it has a really very important meaning—to form a relation with an art form but in a manner where I am not distorting the actual thing.

I took Rakesh's *Ashad Ka Ek Din* primarily because I thought that play was more like a text. A written text rather than a play. I have also used poems, short stories, even essays but I try to retain them in their original form, without disturbing them, so that I can know what I am, what my film is. This has become really clear to me in my last film. By the time I make a few more films, I should be able to make films more directly. Because my own work is becoming far more clear; informing this relation with other arts, if I am able to preserve them, and clarify my own attitudes. But if you make a kind of a mangled thing where you distort this and you distort film also, you reach a third dramatised peculiar film. It is very important, therefore, if possible inherent too much trouble! paradoxically for me, to work in real cinematography, to work in a relation without becoming a parasite on the material that I have. If I become a parasite, I shall not only destroy myself, but I will destroy the thing that I'm parasiting on.

Q. *In that case, why shouldn't people just read* Muktibodh, *why should they see it*?

A. This is a most significant question and I have always wondered why people don't ask me this question. Because I really feel that I am quite clear, when I approach say literature or any form, I really want to see how much I can do truly in a cinematographic way. Not in a way which should destroy both cinematography and the work that it is based on. Because in any relation, this is the problem. That if you understand or accept the independence of that to which you are relating, then you give yourself independence and freedom. But if you rob that independence or if you try to distort the thing which you are working on, then you lose your own independence. It's true of any relationship. You have to accept above all the independence of literature from cinema or the independence of theatre from cinema. So it's very clear in my films, you can see theatre quite separately, literature quite separately, they are very clearly apart. So that relation will reflect on myself. It will make me know how much I can do. You will be surprised to know I didn't write a script for *Sateh Se Uthata Admi*. I had the text in front of me and I worked on location. I'm not in the habit of going to locations and working out, which I detest; I go to a location so as to be in that location, feel that location and then I shoot. I am deciding where the camera, which lenses, where the actors will be, what will happen, everything will be decided there and then. So it's very sur-

prising that with the help of true literature, I am able to ged rid of this idea of writing a script. There was only the text. That text I compiled at one place—exactly as the writer had written it. I gave it to all my crew members. I said the script is not there, you have to work on this text now. I am working on this text, which is more or less the relation which I am seeking with something outside me. I can assure you that there will come a time when I will seek a relation outside say, the location. I'll go to, say, a factory and make a film. After all these exercises that I have done, I'm beginning to think this that if today I'm left on the road, I can form a relation with it. Because I have those means for which I don't have to write a script, where I place my camera, what will happen, how do I construct. For me, that's the object. Just like this is a literary object for me. I tell an actor also to treat a word like you would treat a chair. Or treat the chair with the same significance as I treat this word. A word is also something you are relating to, a chair also when you sit on it, it's something that you relate to. There is no difference for me between the two. The word and the chair. It doesn't make the word less, it only makes the chair more. I told an actress that there's no difference between your face and a tree for me. I said your face is like a landscape and so is the tree. But she thought I was trying to reduce her to a tree. I said on the contrary, I'm trying to look at a tree like I look at you. Then she was pleased. I think you will realise that my films happen like that.

Q. *They do. One last thing. It's very interesting that after a film based on the theatre* Ashad Ka Ek Din *and then another on a literary work, now you want to make one on music.*

A. Yes, I'm doing a film on music. Yes, it's very strange that in fact I'm trying to form relations with traditional art forms and claim to be a monographer. You will say that I should not be wasting myself on these texts. But this is a paradox and I think it is a legitimate one. Soon I will have learnt a lot. In about 3-4 years time, you may find me shooting a film on the road.

KUMAR SHAHANI

Kumar Shahani graduated first from the Film and Television Institute, Pune, in 1966 and won a French Government scholarship to Paris in 1968. Ritwik Ghatak, then teaching at Pune, and Robert Bresson in Paris, have been two key figures in the development of Kumar Shahani's very personal vision of the cinema. Frail, intense, introspective and charming, he is one of the most respected intellectuals and theoreticians of the Indian cinema.

He made his first film Maya Darpan *in 1972 which was financed by the Film Finance Corporation. It won high acclaim, national and international awards and recognition, but was never released commercially. "If other directors are successfully copying avant garde techniques from the West, Shahani alone displays the originality of genius", wrote the British critic Mansell Simpson in* Film *in 1973.*

In 1974, Shahani got the Homi Bhabha Fellowship to study The Epic Form and Cinema. *Out of this work, for which he learned Sanskrit in order to read plays and texts in their original, came the script for* Tarang, *based on the Mahabharata. He is now in the process of completing it after financial delays held it up for three years. He has also made a number of documentaries.*

Q. *How did you come to cinema?*

KUMAR SHAHANI

I wanted to continue studying so I enrolled for post-graduation in political science and history, and I found that there wasn't much in it. I thought that people, my colleagues, were not serious about it. People who were studying, people who were teaching, did not care for what they were doing, so there was no kind of commitment to the work. It was a very strange situation because you were supposed to be studying political science. The first thing should be some kind of commitment to your environment, whatever it is, but there wasn't anything of that kind and I got a bit put off by that. Then I met a few people who were running a film society in Bombay. They were a very small group of people—about sixty to seventy—and one began to see films with them. They asked if I could help organise some film shows, so one went around asking for films or trying to organise them and so on. It was at that time that I also met Ritwik Ghatak, who later became my teacher, and I saw *Subarnarekha* and felt that possibly here was a field where one could explore things and have a kind of relationship with one's own environment, which is more vital than in the social sciences.

Q. *What, through films*?

A. Yes, there was this feeling that, as an artist of some kind, you could relate much better to your immediate environment to start with, and then to something broader later. But with the social sciences, there seemed to be no choice at all. There was no thinking being done in the social sciences at all.

Q. *That's what you always felt, the need to relate*?

A. Yes, there was that very strong need. Perhaps, it was also because of the fact that I belong to a refugee family and there was a very strong feeling. . .

Q. *Refugee family from where*?

A. From Sind. It was after the partition—the fact we had come here. I was only seven years old.

Q. *So your conception of the artist might be related to this, an artist as committed personally, as 'engagé'.*

A. It may not be explicitly 'engagé' in that kind of sense. It need not be strictly partisan. I feel that way—there were pressures later, much later, to be strictly partisan—in some way or the other, I feel very often, a party tries to control the immediacy of the relationship with your basic living patterns and that again doesn't seem to work out. Because then you have an ideology, given to you by somebody else. Again, you fall into a group of some kind. So there was this great need for this relationship which was constant and immediate, which was growing, and which did not have a fixed and rigid ideology, which was not trying to convert you to a true believer of a kind, but which actually tried to engage you into a lively relationship, which could constantly change and allow your personal experience to show itself.

Q. *That's why the cinema*?

A. Yes, it could have been any other art like this, theoretically, hypothetically, but it had probably something to do with reasons which I can just guess at. But there was a choice for the cinema, I mean there was a choice at that time between music, theatre, poetry and the cinema. In the sense that one could have hypothetically chosen, but there was a kind of inevitability. Because it seemed that there was so much of a possibility in cinema that you could integrate almost any question you ask. However lively at that moment, they were extremely naive questions that you asked of social being and of your tradition and so on, but the cinema

seemed to embrace all of it. You could begin at any point and then you couldn't rest there. You could begin with music, or you could begin with political science itself and you would have to tackle the other questions as well.

Q. *Cinema was much better as a process, as a dynamic?*

A. Yes.

Q. *More than any other form of art.*

A. Absolutely, and I still think that.

Q. *More than theatre, for instance.*

A. Well for one thing, theatre wasn't lively here. It must have been in other circumstances. It could have been better. There is also a question of one's own temperament. Theatre is very extroverted. It tries to project all the time and I think cinema is more reflective. It could do that, so the choice was for something which could be reflective because of my own temperament, possibly.

Q. *So you made your choice. And then?*

A. Yes, and then one did not know how to go about it. I came across this advertisement in the papers that there was this Film Institute in Poona and one could learn to make films—1961 was the time the Film Institute started.—I came out of college in 1962, just about, and it was 1963 that I joined the Film Institute; I wasted nearly one year after college, exploring. I did not know what was in store, except for the fact that the cinema is such a wonderful medium which would keep posing challenges of a kind. It wasn't something that you learnt as one fixed rigid discipline and readymade sort of thing.

Q. *Were you thinking that cinema is so complete and challenging? What were your contacts with cinema before this?*

A. Well, there was this film society for which I began to even organise some film shows and so on. I could see the relationship that was developing between oneself and the other people and the screen ... and the people who were around and how meaningful it was. It never ended with a show. There was something that you carried home and you carried to other people. It was something which would open up a lot of areas and which would keep exposing you in terms of what you thought of before. The exposure was limited though, and one felt a great deal of frustration on that account.

Even when one was at the Institute, in those days the Archives hadn't built up. So my colleagues and I used to read about so many films being made in the world and knew that these films were not accessible to us. There was a tremendous hunger for more films to be seen and to be made.

Q. *What film had you seen before, which had some impact on you?*

A. One of the films that I had seen was Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* and I had seen *Pather Panchali*. There were a number of films from different countries which one saw but which had just as much of an impact —I think of *Dolce Vita, Hiroshima Mon Amour*. These were the kind of films one was very deeply affected by, and they seemed to open up a *totally* new idea of art, anyway, if not of actual contact in one's environment. In the case of *Subarnarekha*, of course, there was the sole question of environment as well, because those are questions being asked as well and it was only after joining the Film Institute that one began to feel that the areas to be explored could be even greater than what one had been exposed to so far. That was a sort of slow process and it really became more involved, infinite, if that's possible.

Q. *Which were the first areas you thought of exploring?*

A. Well, the first thing that struck one was again, this question of alienation, but it was not the question of alienation as it is talked about in contemporary Western literature and cinema, but perhaps, in the Marxist sense of alienation which is nineteenth century, and which is the alienation that one feels as a result of technology, as a result of the break-up of a whole social "fabric". Well, you do not have one integrated social unit performing given tasks—and speaking one single language, or a single given form of art practising a single thing.

Q. *That may mean theatre.*

A. In theatre, yes. In that there is folk theatre where you have that kind of integrated thing. At least apparently. But if one discovers that it is not true any longer because a lot of "tamasha troups" go through Poona and they perform at a theatre called Aaray Bhushan. You could see the influence of the urban arts functioning in folk art, you know. The only way that folk theatre could last was, in fact, by talking those areas into their system and revitalising it, or prostituting it, whatever. They could be both. So actually this total disintegration which had taken place by the sixties, of a social fabric which is otherwise almost tribal, in the sense so closely knit, but by the time I had grown into an adult one could see all the divisions which were there. Now, there was also at the time at the Institute, a problem of re-integration, because this thing happened. And then I met this very great, the greatest man that I have

ever met, D.D. Kosambi, who is a historian, and he was living within walking distance from the school, and he conducted—he described his method as 'history at the doorstep'—and I went out for a walk with him at his doorstep, which is the hill behind the Institute. On that hill from which you can look down at the Institute, you have these microliths, and there you can actually understand how a tradition grows, from a very primitive level, from the wood-gathering stage to Kosambi himself who was explaining to me what had happened on that hill. It was just fantastic to have this kind of experience. It was wonderful, and that morning has really remained with me like something out of this world.

In the Institute one lived in a world where one was so isolated from what was going on in the commercial world. Almost all of us, when we came out here just didn't know what to do with this kind of situation. There were these 'obvious' jobs available—advertising or something of that kind. But they would have completely killed whatever initiative there was. We used to meet outside the 'Irani' restaurants where you can sit with half a cup of tea for hours together and leave messages for each other outside. And nothing was forthcoming. Then there was a documentary which K.K. Mahajan and I did; we managed to get it from the Gujarat Government. It was on mentally retarded children.

Q. *That means that the diploma helped you to get your first film.*

A. Yes, that was my first documentary. It was very interesting to make. It was something to which I could relate and try to say something in which I believed. But, in terms of feature films, there seemed to be nothing possible at all. And, meanwhile, I learnt about a French Government scholarship. So I went to Paris the year after my graduation from the Film Institute.

Q. *After leaving the Film Institute you must have had a lot of ideas and hopes. How did you react to the impossibility of making feature films, and did you analyse as to why it was not possible*?

A. But at that time I had no objective analysis as to why it was not possible, and if I had absolutely accepted that objective situation, it would have not been possible for me to act any further. It would have been too oppressive. It would just have completely killed whatever initiative I had.

Q. *So then you went to Paris.*

A. Yes. And when I went to Paris I had thought of working with one of the "New Wave" film-directors. Well, I had thought of Godard. Obviously, I had not seen any films of his. None of Godard's films had come to India. This was in 1967. As soon as I went to Paris I did see

A Bout de Souffle and then I saw *La Chinoise*. I just wondered whether it would be suitable for me to work with Godard because I felt a tremendous distance. I liked those films, but he seemed to be working out certain problems which were far too contemporary in the French situation for me, I couldn't absolutely link it up with the, let's say, the European tradition that I knew. And then I saw *Au Hazard Balthazar* by Bresson. I think it's just beautiful, really like music, melodic. I not only sat through this film, I saw another half of it, as much as I could see on this permanent screen before I left. That was the time I decided that I was going to work with Bresson, if I could help it.

Q. *Why? What did you particularly like during this first contact with Bresson's films?*

A. It was this very great musicality. I feel that in cinema, sequence is something that you cannot avoid, you know, even if you have a single image. Suppose one has an absolutely static image throughout the film, which is perhaps like a photograph. Let's say we just have an image of a black table, but the black table has to last for five seconds, five hours or five days. So there is a sequence, there is a sequence probably of the same event, but there is a sequence. And really, the range of that sequence could be just one black table, static, to hundreds of millions of images and light impulses that you may get from the projector. So these are the two extremes. So amongst the traditional arts, the only art which can deal with this kind of sequence is music, and one cannot escape it. This sequence is an abstract fashion.

Q. *How did you get in touch with Bresson?*

A. I found his address through IDHEC[1] and I wrote to him saying that I'd like to interview him as a journalist. I took a friend along who could speak French better than me, and we talked about his films and he could see that I had not only liked them very much, but had also studied the films that I had seen. At the end of the interview I told him I was actually a film maker and would like to work with him. So he said that he wasn't making a film at that time, but if I could stay on till next summer, there would be a possibility of working with him. I had not planned to stay on so long in France.

Q. *What was your impression when you met Bresson for the first time?*

A. I thought I had made the right choice. Absolutely. Because by then, between the time that I saw that film and made that decision and

[1]The Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques in Paris.

meeting him, a lot had happened to me. That was the tremendous shock of coming into contact in a deeper fashion, let's say, with European civilisation. Earlier, there was a kind of colonial relationship between the European and the Indian. But now I could appreciate them as human beings. There was a questioning of that tradition, which was more important, and an immediate necessity to relate to that environment and to be able to hate and love, like, admire, to really live in those circumstances and not live just as a foreigner, tourist or student but get involved in that situation. When I met Bresson, I knew that I was going to be able to know that tradition much better through this contact with him, than with a younger director, for example. I thought I would know classical Europe much better. And that, I think, did work out very well.

Q. *How long did you work with him*?

A. I worked with him for about two-and-a-half months; mostly on the shooting. Very often, after the shooting, we use to go to see the rushes from the shooting site every day so, very often, I used to go with him in the car or he used to drop me home sometimes. That was the time when we could talk about something. At the time of shooting one can't possibly talk.

Q. *What is the most important thing you got from him*?

A. There was a tremendous unity, a unity of form and content. Really tremendous. I could see it at work in his practice and that was something that Ritwik Ghatak and Eisenstein had also emphasised. To see it once again in actual practice in the case of Bresson, right from the way he used a lens to the kind of thing he did with his actors or the kind of reference that he had in painting or in music. It also meant a lot of rejection on his part of certain other things which I had liked very much, like say some of the things that Le Corbusier uses from the Gothic tradition. Now Bresson would reject that totally, and this is something that we talked about and I would sometimes find him very intolerant in that respect, but that was his integrity and so it gave me a perspective about what I could do with my own surroundings and the kind of traditions that I have, including this colonial experience, or the post-colonial experience. He was very involved in movements for the liberation of immigrants from all kinds of bad labour practices in France. And 1968 when it happened it was marvellous.

Q. *Then you came back to India*?

A. Yes, but I was still there in May 1968 when it happened. It was just marvellous. After that my problem of loving the French or the Europeans as human beings, just loving and hating and all that, you know,

which I had before, was completely solved because in 1968 suddenly all the great facades, Napoleonic facades, crumbled. So you could meet people and there was a lot of joy in that.

Oh! it was really quite wonderful and one was there in demonstrations and one shared the fear of the people who were next to you. There was the police which very often mistook me for an Arab. So that was bad, I mean, physically and one got more and more involved, and there was so much love. I've never seen so much love, you would meet a person on the street and you would be embracing that person. I wish this could happen more often. It was just fantastic. It's like a dream come true. But it didn't last very long. But, in any case, it lived with a lot of individuals and I know it still does with a lot of people and when I go to France sometimes—now I haven't been for years, it's very long, and I don't know what it's like—but every time I've been there, I've met some people for whom just those three or four weeks still matter a lot, and who try and live in some way, trying to let that spirit remain alive. And at that time I was getting very involved, I must say. Bresson's assistant was Jacques Kebaldian, who was a second generation immigrant to France: Turkish-Armenian Jew. And he knew Godard very well, who, by then, had become part of that movement and was excited. So we went to the screening of some of the films that Godard had made as a result of the May '68 experience and had some discussions with him. Then Godard has this idea of making a film with six immigrant film makers—I don't know if it was ever made, I don't think it was—so Kebaldian asked me whether I would like to stay on, maybe help or work as one of those young students. I thought that now if I decide to stay on then, it would mean being neither here nor there, so I decided to come back.

Q. *What was your first reaction after coming back?*

A. I think for some time there was a very false hope. In the sense that one carried that into this situation also, but there were a lot of things happening at that time in India which also had those kind of experiences, if possible. I mean, the Naxalite movement had already started—it's a Maoist movement in Calcutta—which had started. Although the movement was restricted to Calcutta, not Calcutta in fact, it was in Naxalbari in the rural areas, it had great spiritual reverberations, all over the country. There was a change which I noticed in Bombay, and suddenly something seemed to have happened all over the world, which seemed to promise a very drastic change. Even in the most bourgeois people, there was a feeling as if something is going to change in such a way that people will blossom, and it was not necessary to withdraw, to stay back from that change. That period of hope was also reflected in an overall situation. It was like in 1789 the aristocrats of France also decided that it was best to breast-feed their children to recover that great natural quality of the noble savage and that kind of thing. Something of that nature was around in

the air. But, of course, it was not supported by a very great organised movement of any kind. The Maoists, for example, in India then got split up, just like any other communist movement. The other progressives also went back to little corners of their own. In the meantime, we had the Bangladesh war coming on and there was a drought. Things changed once again to their tremendously conservative, very restrictive atmosphere.

So when I got back, some of my colleagues had already started work, like Mahajan with whom I had worked on my diploma film and then the film on mentally retarded children. He had shot *Bhuvan Shome* for Mrinal Sen—that was when I was already in Paris. He had written to me saying that he was shooting that and the FFC had changed its policy. Then *Uski Roti* which K.K. (Mahajan) had shot and Mani Kaul had made, so there was an actual possibility that if one's own colleagues were making films, it was possible to make a film. I really started looking around for some material to shoot. As a result of the experience which I had talked to you about earlier, I did want to deal with political film to some extent, somewhere. And also there was another question of not making an explicitly political film, because by the time I came back here, political cinema had become almost pornographic. It was commercialised to such an extent that you already had Costa Gavras on the scene. I certainly did not want to make that kind of film at all. I wanted to make a film which would have all the politics implicit, rather than a kind of stupid populist stuff! I think one of the most reactionary film-makers in the world is Costa Gavras and he has probably done more harm to the actual relationship between politics and cinema than anyone else I can think of. He utilised it for absolutely commercial purposes. It's exploitation of a genuine need to fight something. It's a purging of that feeling.

Q. *So you started working on* Maya Darpan.

A. Yes, there was something that I had written myself and which I rejected as it wasn't good enough.

Q. *After coming back*?

A. I had started on it before I went, worked on it in France and then here, and then I said it won't do. Then I came across this story of *Maya Darpan.*

Q. *When did you start the film*? *How did you come to be in a position to make it*? *Materially*? *Financially*?

A. I started looking for it from the time I came here, looking for some material from 1969 to 1971, for the right kind of thing to work on. Then after coming across this material, I took about a year. I wanted to make it in colour. The FFC just didn't have the budget necessary for colour. A lot

of people said you know you're doing the right thing, making it in colour, because it'll sell more easily and so on. They didn't know what I was up to. They didn't know I was doing most of it in monochromes! Well, then this film was made. Initially, there was strong rejection of the film from almost everyone and it was a very broad spectrum if one had to think about it in political terms, from the extreme left to the extreme right. There were just a few individuals, again from a very broad spectrum, who really stuck their necks out for it. I think it's only after a number of years that a lot of other people got to know what the film was about and that it had something to say. In fact I have been told by people who have seen it the first time and hated it and seen it a second time and loved it.

But I do feel that the number of individuals who have actually liked that film and spoken about it intelligently has helped a lot. In the meantime, over these years there has been a growing consciousness in a lot of groups in different places, small groups.

Q. *May be it was made done too early.*

A. Yes, I don't know, it could well be that.

Q. *Now how did you work on this film? What was your main idea? How did you work it out and how did you shoot it?*

A. Well, there were certain elements already in the story which attracted me a great deal. There was this element of the hang-over of the colonial and feudal atmosphere and the junction that they make, really. That was all to be suggested through the poetry of whatever medium that you were using and not ever explicitly. So, I thought I could do it through the house, and the composition of the film. There was this question of a constant longing for a green landscape. So that made me think about the colour. Already this thing of the European experience I had was there. I still feel it every time I go abroad. You know, the change of light affects one a lot and I feel that it takes me about ten days to readjust to the light and it really affects all the responses in a very fundamental kind of way. So I wanted to do something with light and colour, and evoke the harshness of the arid light in an arid tropical landscape. And this red to green movement of colour on which I worked. Then there were suggestions of sound throughout. So that one would be freed from a one-to-one content which people had been working with for a long time in Indian cinema. . . . And still be able to make some sort of political statement through it, implicitly.

When I showed the story, for example, to my political friends, they were very, very disturbed. They said I was tackling a subject which was far too sensuous. I was also disturbed by their response because one would have thought that that is the beginning of all experience and philosophy and whatever, of science, the basic sensuous experience. At any rate, that

is most valid in art. But they didn't seem to think so. When I had to cast for the film I had a tremendous problem with my political friends because they had warned some people that this was too sensuous. And when the film was made some of them said that this was about a sexual memoration. I just threw up my hands.

Q. *How do you explain this reproach of "sensuousness"? Did this come from your experience with Bresson?*

A. No, it's not because of Bresson, but because of the entire training that I had had, which is Ritwik Ghatak before Bresson, and even Kosambi who is such a strict Marxist in his historical writings. Because of the fact that I knew him closely, I could see that he expected sensuous experience a great deal, and his whole method was also that of trying to find out from direct sources as well. He was a very great scholar, he was a mathematician and had done research in optics numismatics and in history. But at no point did he reject experience, and I think that's something that was important to me right through my training as a film maker. Then the contact with Bresson confirmed it, because there are those kind of contradictions in Bresson's work also. I mean he is perhaps one of the most important religious film makers and yet you see a tremendous sensuous contact with the world.

Q. *And what, at the moment you shot your film, was your appreciation of the Indian cinema? That may explain also the way you started working.*

A. Yes, there was an identification with tradition at that time. It wasn't so in 1967, when I passed out of the Film Institute and I was a little confused about the whole situation around. By that time, in 1972, when I made *Maya Darpan,* I started thinking about it. I was quite sure of what I did not want to do. For example, I could see that the idea of realism which had been imported from the entire Western tradition was not necessarily right and I could place myself in the cinematic tradition along with Ritwik Ghatak. And also identify myself with an international tradition which did not necessarily work from an imitation of reality. So there was quite a firm ground from which to take off. That was very necessary, otherwise I could not have made it.

Q. *And what was Indian cinema for you at the time? Realism?*

A. No. The rest of the Indian cinema was just madness.

Q. *And now, do you see any difference between 1972 and 1982?*

A. Not in the major Indian cinema, with which I'm really not concerned, I mean the commercial. I don't know if it is cinema. It could very

well be anything else with which people make money, easy money. Of course, it is a very important sociological force and I see it only as that, but I am not interested in it as cinema at all. I do see certain sociological trends appearing, like the acceptance of the criminal hero. And that one sees in the society of Bombay. People are very proud of having a perfectly respectable exterior; a very petit bourgeois person is very proud of having a smuggler as his neighbour. In Bombay it's almost accepted, I don't know if it is so in other cities. Unless you're a criminal, in some way, unless you're committing a crime, you're stupid, well, you can't do anything with yourself, you can't go ahead. That's all.

Q. *Are there any other sociological statements you would make about the majority Indian cinema*?

A. It's getting to be more and more governed by international—what would you call it. . . I don't know what the word for it is.

Q. *International uniformisation*?

A. Yes, standardisation of civilisation. Yes. The most important new trend as a result of the things that happened between the period in 1968 to 1973-74 all over the world again, not only in India, is a trend of compromise, the middle trend.

Q. *Petit bourgeois trend*?

A. Yes, I think that is a very important thing, it's a part of that sociological trend, to give respectability to the smuggler.

Q. *Or credibility.*

A. Yes, credibility. Ostensibly you may take up a theme of social change and so on. It's become very fashionable to talk about social change. You do nothing actually to change the form of the cinema or to change the content of the cinema. But what you do is just change the decorative aspects of the image.

Q. *A variation of the same theme*?

A. Yes. You may dress up a person like a slum person or you may have somebody living in the slums and you may give him the language that you imagine the slum dwellers use, and you present that and, of course, *Newsweek* picks it up; *Time* magazine picks it up.

Q. *So it's purely a mythological cinema, I mean, medium.*

A. Yes. And there's this whole idea of mass communication and it started with mass communication. You mentioned Karanjia[2] as one of the supporters of people like us. He was definitely a supporter. He also asked us "What are you going to do? Because cinema is a medium of mass communication." And so one would say. "But who has decided that?" I don't know who has decided that. It has been thrown at us all the time. Now, gradually, mass is there, but it's to be understood when they say communication. They say: "Don't you want to communicate?" Well, obviously one wants to communicate.

Q. *What is it that you want to communicate, and do these films communicate*?

A. Well, I thought that communication meant that you had something to say which was not said before or not known before. That you went from a known situation to an unknown situation, therefore you made a film on whatever. But this is from the known to the known to the known to the known and onwards.

Q. *Again standardisation. Then* Maya Darpan *has been rejected, perhaps because it was obviously out of the "known and known and known".*

A. No, I think it was because of the expectations, mainly, of people who go to see films and I have found that it is sometimes very successful with a very small audience of fifty or hundred. They again could be from a range of people who have not been exposed to good cinema at all.

Q. *How do you explain that*?

A. Because, I think they come there by accident, and not with expectations. If I want to go to a brothel and if, instead of finding a prostitute there, and garish lights, I find something else, I would be disappointed. So, if on the other hand, one walks into, say a house where there are children playing, or something like that, like seeing children, that's a totally different experience. But you don't want to see children playing when you go to a brothel. And I think that it is a question of expectations.

Q. *And what happened after* Maya Darpan?

A. I wrote a script and gave it to the FFC, and the script committee thought it was a very fine script and they also said that it is a little more abstract than *Maya Darpan*, something of that kind. So the Board of

[2]B.K. Karanjia, author of *Star System* in this book.

Directors then decided that they should ask me to make something a little "more human."

Q. *What are their own criteria for this "more human"?*

A. Their criteria? Mass communication.

Q. *Action and mythology?*

A. Yes, so it went on. At that kind of ethnological approach, really. And then I went on to study the epic form actually to be able to overcome this very problem. I'm still studying it.

Q. *So, this script was the script of your second film?*

A. No, I have not even started making that at all. I couldn't make it, so I had to forget about it. Then I wrote another script, which is *Tarang* and which did include epic elements, and takes in some of the mythological elements, and then tried and fit them in a form, to churn them up in a certain fashion, so I could break it from the time.

Q. *What is the basic idea of this script? Of* Tarang?

A. Well, there's been a great debate on the idea of what the Indian bourgeoisie is about, and, of course, there have been very strong and rather dogmatic debates about what the Indian bourgeoisie is, the nature of the Indian bourgeoisie. It had, of course, interested me a great deal. But I had a bourgeois background. I mean I went to school and college and knew a lot of that class. Somehow I came to feel that the debate never seemed to get down to the real things and, once again, it was a question of experiencing the reality and theorising about that reality—the difference between the two. So I wanted to explore that.

Q. *And your script has been accepted by the NFDC.*

A. Yes.

Q. *Why, because it was more epic?*

A. Possibly, yes. In fact, one of the members said that the script is very commercial, it's too commercial for the NFDC. I was delighted by this kind of idea.

Q. *But it got accepted. When was that?*

A. It was in 1978.

Q. *Then what happened after that*?

A. Well, I started making the film, which everyone thought was going to be highly commercial. Obviously, somewhere along the line, the person who was backing it felt that it wasn't going the way he thought it would, and he just stopped.

Q. *Do you have any idea why it has been stopped*?

A. I really don't know. That's two years ago, over two years ago—now it's two-and-a-half years—it was June 1979 that we stopped making the film. There has been no progress on it since. I thought that the NFDC hereafter would somehow manage to salvage the situation. But it hasn't happened. Are they interested or not, I don't know. They say they are.

Q. *But you were already shooting at that time.*

A. I have shot sixty per cent of the film and their funds are involved in it. And I don't really know whether they are actually interested or not because they have not acted on it since June 1979 and they have said, from time to time, that they are interested. In the meantime the Board of Directors has changed and they have also said that they are interested.

Q. *So what is going to happen now*?

A. I would have to be a prophet to know. It's absolutely. . . it's crazy, from week to week one keeps hearing things will start. That's been going on for over two-and-a-half years and nothing happens.

Q. *And nothing has been solved, nothing has been decided recently*?

A. Well, in the meantime, they saw the rushes, and so on, which I think is a nasty thing to do without having asked me. It's, I thought, an internationally acknowledged ethic that one asks the director of the film before one steps in to see a single shot. In fact, one doesn't really ask. One's either invited to see it or one is not. But, anyway, they probably did it to help me or whatever. So, the year after that—well, in February 1981 they said that they would grant the additional funds to complete the film and I haven't yet got the funds sanctioned.

Q. *Since that time*?

A. Waiting! In this context, it is important to mention the fact that the director—the film director—in India has virtually no rights over his film. I mean, it's really property—it's treated like any other property and it's the producer of the film—somebody who has given the money, who has total

control. I think the situation is quite different in Italy and France. In this context, I think it is very important that something should be done about the rights of authorship, that such a situation should not be allowed to arise at all. It's legally wrong.

January 1982